

# FACT SHEET ON YOUTH: PREGNANCY AND CONTRACEPTION

OCTOBER 2003



## HIGHLIGHTS

- ***Jamaica's adolescent fertility rate in 1997 was among the highest in the Caribbean at 112 pregnancies per 1,000 women, ages 15-19<sup>1</sup>***
- ***In 2001, 338 babies were born to youth under 15 years, and 9,479 to youth under 19 years.<sup>1</sup>***
- ***About one third or 32.8 per cent of women experiencing pregnancy, between the ages of 15-24, first conceive while in school<sup>1</sup>***
- ***Approximately 40 percent of Jamaican women experience pregnancy at least once before age 20.<sup>1</sup>***
- ***Less than 50 percent of sexually active adolescents use condoms consistently.***
- ***Adolescents are not aware of the wide range of contraceptives available that can protect them from pregnancy.***
- ***Contraceptive use at first intercourse is positively correlated to age at sexual debut.***
- ***Use of contraception at first sex rose from 23% to 41% between 1993 and 1997 for women younger than 14 years; and from 42% to 58% for women, ages 15-17 years.<sup>1</sup>***

## Background

The adolescent fertility rate for Jamaica in 1997 was reported at 112 for every 1000 women, ages 15-19.<sup>1</sup> The vast majority of births, 83%, to women in this age group were mistimed or unwanted. This fact has far-reaching implications for the health and well-being of young parents and their children.<sup>1</sup>

The high rate of adolescent pregnancy and child-bearing has its roots in many factors. These include the early age of sexual initiation<sup>2</sup> the prevalence of misinformation about pregnancy and pregnancy prevention<sup>2</sup> and the difficulty many young people face in accessing contraceptive information and services.<sup>3</sup>

In the past decade, while the rate of contraceptive use has increased for all women in Jamaica, from 62% in 1993 to 66% in 1997, the rate for adolescents, 15-19 years old, actually decreased slightly, from 58.8% to 58.6%.<sup>1</sup> Several factors limit young people's access to contraceptive services and information. These include the late commencement of Family Life Education;<sup>4</sup> provisions of the Offences Against the Person Act (1964), which prevent health workers providing medical care (including reproductive health care) to anyone under 16 years of age;<sup>4</sup> and health providers and communities attitudes which oppose adolescent sexual activity and therefore pregnancy prevention for adolescents, on moral and religious grounds.<sup>3</sup> These issues have been given special attention in recent years. Government and civil society programmes have sought to reduce early pregnancy and its effects on young families and the larger society.

## Adolescent Pregnancy and Childbearing

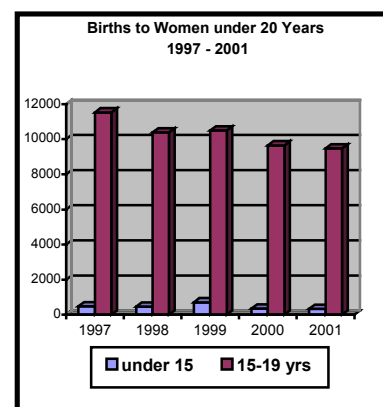
The proportion of births to adolescents decreased between 1997 and 2001, but remains high: 20.4% of total births in 2001.

A 2001 study conducted by Hope Enterprises found that approximately 44.4% of girls, ages 15-19, reported ever being pregnant and 10.6% of boys in that age group reported making someone pregnant.<sup>2</sup> By the time they reach age 18, approximately one-quarter of young women have had their first child; by age 20, this figure jumps to 40%.<sup>1</sup>

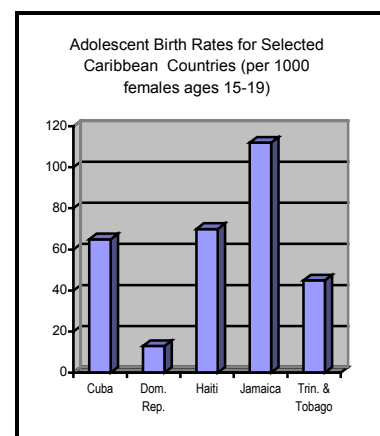
Early pregnancy has far-reaching effects on young people's educational, economic and social opportunities. Studies estimate that anywhere from 50% to 80% of young women do not return to school after giving birth.<sup>5,6</sup> For young men, adolescent fatherhood is similarly linked to high rates of school drop-out, as young men are forced to enter the workforce and, oftentimes, the informal, lower-wage workforce, in order to support their young families.<sup>7</sup>

## Early Sexual Activity

Sexual debut occurs early for many - age 13 years for boys and age 15 years for girls.<sup>2</sup>



Source: Registrar General Dept., 2002



Source: Ministry of Health, 1999

By age 16, 71% of adolescents have had sex, with far more boys (82%) reporting sexual activity by this age than girls (56%).<sup>2</sup> Even more noticeable, however, is the rate of current sexual activity among young people. In 2001, more than two-fifths (43.5%) of sexually active 15-19 year olds and 27% of sexually active 10-14 year olds reported having sex in the last month.<sup>2</sup>

### Lack of Early Sexuality Education

In 1997, approximately 86% of young women and 76% of young men, ages 15-24, reported receiving Family Life Education (FLE), as stipulated in the national reproductive health curriculum which includes general information on pregnancy prevention and contraception.<sup>1</sup> For many youth, however, FLE begins too late. While the majority of girls begin FLE at age 13 or later, an estimated 17% of girls become pregnant while in primary school.<sup>4</sup>

### Knowledge about Pregnancy and Contraception

Although young people exhibit relatively high levels of awareness of contraceptive methods, gaps exist in their level of knowledge regarding pregnancy and pregnancy prevention. Recent surveys point to early universal knowledge (greater than 99%) of the male condom as a contraceptive method.<sup>1,2</sup> In 2001, an estimated 93% of 15-19 year olds were also able to identify the oral contraceptive pill, 87% the injectables, 65.7%, the female condoms, and 35.8%, the emergency contraception as methods of pregnancy prevention.<sup>1</sup> Among 10-14 year olds, 78.5% identified abstinence, 69% the pill, 66% injectables, and 41%, female condoms.<sup>1</sup>

In contrast, as many as 16% of the 15-19 year olds and 42% of 10-14 year olds were unaware that a girl could get pregnant the first time she had sex.<sup>2</sup> When asked whether a girl could get pregnant if

she had sex standing up, approximately 58% of the 15-19 year olds and 38% of the 10-14 year olds were able to answer correctly.<sup>2</sup> Even fewer -- 57% of 15-19 year olds and 33% of 10-14 year olds -- knew that a girl could get pregnant if she has sex in water.<sup>2</sup>

### Contraceptive Use

Data from the 1997 RHS indicate that 58.7% of women in union, ages 15-19 years, and 66.9% of those ages 20-24 are using contraception.<sup>1</sup> In the 2001 condom survey, 85% of sexually active girls, 15-19 years old, and 88% of boys reported that they have ever used a contraceptive.<sup>2</sup> The data reveal a startling gender disparity. While the contraceptive use rate for males increased from 31%, the first time they had sex, to 68% at most recent sex, females reported a drop from 58.8% to 52.6% respectively.<sup>2</sup> An estimated 19% of young women, ages 15-19, and 15% of those ages 20-24 have an unmet need for contraceptive services.<sup>1,8</sup>

Among youth, condoms are the most commonly used method, with 61% of males, 15-24 years old, reporting using one at their last sexual encounter.<sup>2</sup> Problems exist, however, with the use of condoms as the main method to prevent pregnancy, due to their higher rate of failure, and higher rate of discontinuation, estimated at 48% after 12 months of use.<sup>5</sup> Young women also have the least control over the use of this method.<sup>5</sup>

Pill usage ranks second after the condom for youth and use generally increases with age of the adolescent. In 1997, an estimated 18% of females 15-19 years old, and 24.6% of those 20-24 years old reported using the pill as their main contraceptive method.<sup>2</sup>

### Accessing Contraceptives

The 2001 condom survey identified several barriers to youth's access to contraceptives. Some 80% of 15-19 year olds reported that it was easy to acquire the male condom;

few respondents report that condom outlets refuse to sell to young adolescents, or the young person's own embarrassment, poses difficulties in accessing contraceptives.<sup>2</sup>

The majority, 54%, of 15-19 year old males purchased their supplies from a small grocery or retail store. Most females, 46%, relied on their partners to provide the methods.<sup>2</sup> Approximately 21% of young women sourced contraceptives from clinics or health centres, compared to 8.6% of young men. Pharmacies were the main source of methods for 8% of young men surveyed and 13.5% of young women.<sup>2</sup>

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### Fact Sheet on Youth in Jamaica: Pregnancy and Contraception



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